DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 247 617 CS 504 655

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TITLE Developing an Experiential Learning Program Using Cable Television.
PUB DATE Apr 84
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Speech Association (Chicago, IL, April 12-14, 1984).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cable Television; *Course Content; Course Descriptions; *Curriculum Development; Experiential Learning; Higher Education; Instructional Design; Instructional Development; *Management Development; *Production Techniques; *Television Curriculum; Television Teachers

ABSTRACT

To describe the development of an experiential learning program for mass communication students, this report presents the results of a year-long experiment designed to help students gain in professionalism by both managing a cable channel and producing programs for it. The first section of the report describes the experiment, which was the result of a proposal calling for a graduate cable management seminar with a budget to develop pilot programs and a management structure for an exclusive university cable channel. The second section describes the development of learning objectives through student participation in the design of the management structure and pilot programs, while the third section illustrates the necessity of prefield orientation for independent study students regarding production deadlines and weekly evaluative reports. The fourth section lists suggested evaluative procedures, including self-evaluation, journals, videotapes and photos, and written or oral reports. The fifth section delineates the importance of the faculty advisor, and the role of the on-site supervisor is considered in the sixth section. The final section offers recommendations, which include involving as many mass communication staff members as possible, hiring a full-time instructor/program coordinator, having a graduate student executive producer, describing specific tasks to be accomplished before the term, and developing a master calender of tasks to be finished during the term. (CRH)

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DEVELOPING AN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PROGRAM USING CABLE TELEVISION

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To be presented at the 1984 Central States Speech Association Conference.

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Developing an Experiential Learning Program

Using Cable Television

Corporate and broadcast professionals have recommended increased training in practical skills for college students who want to work in video industries.[1] In a survey by David Ostroff and John Tierney of Bowling Green State University (Ohio), it was found that corporate video users wanted students to gain experience in program design, post-production editing, electronic editing, producing, scriptwriting, and to have some knowledge of corporate structure.[2] Students at several universitites have produced programs for local cable television channels as part of their coursework or as an extracurricular activity. According to the involved faculty at these schools, such experience provides practical experience in skills sought by industry. Lynne Schafer Gross, at California State University, Fullerton, claims that students in cable production classes gain motivation and greatly improve the quality of their work by acting as producers for community programs.[3] Indiana University's Eileen Bender believes in an ideal "marriage of cable television, which desparately needs more local programming, and educational institutions."[4]

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[1]Diane M. Gayeski, "For Non-Broadcast TV," E-ITV, March 1980, pp. 61-64.

[2]David H. Ostroff and John Tierney, "What Corporate Media Professionals Want TV Students to Learn," E-ITV, September 1981, p. 5.

[3]Lynne Schafer Gross, "These Production Students Learn to Thrive Under Pressure," Instructional Innovator, January 1983, pp. 28-29.

[4]Eileen T. Bender, "Cable TV: Road to Nowhere?" The Education Digest, February 1979, p. 6.

Cable program production has not been the only way students have gained practical production experience. For example, teachers such as Dianne Gayeski[5] at Ithica College, N.Y., and Susan Barber[6] at Emerson College, Boston, have reported important gains in professionalism among students interning as producers of tapes for organizations. In addition, cable may provide a wider variety of opportunities than other experiential programs because students can manage a channel as well as produce programs for it. At Miami University (Ohio), Mass Communication classes did both in a year-long experiment last year. Although we believe they learned a great deal, we have found it difficult to describe exactly the kind and quality of that learning, partly because we did not know what to expect. To prepare for the coming year's cable activity, we decided to measure our past experience against the general principles of experiential learning and to write recommendations for improvement. This article shares our observations with others who may be using or planning to use cable for practical learning in production and management.

The Experiment

Our experiment began in the fall of 1982, after Miami's President approved a Mass Communication proposal that the Oxford cable channel, dedicated for exclusive university use, be programmed and managed by Mass Communication students. The proposal, developed by the Mass Communication Chief Engineer, a teacher of video production, and the Director of Telecommunications, called for a graduate cable management

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[5]Gayeski, p. 64.

[6]Susanna Barber, "A Curriculum for Corporate Video Production," E-ITV, November 1982, pp. 66-68.

seminar with a budget to develop pilot programs and a management structure for the channel. The seminar reported to Miami's Director of Telecommunications, who was authorized to approve all programs. After programming ideas were developed by the seminar, production classes produced programs based on the pilots. Video production classes and independent study students produced programs for the channel for nine weeks after the channel became active in March of 1983. In all, 57 students participated in managing the channel and in producing over fifty hours of original programs (including live baseball) which were telecast on cable channel 29. The name of the student organization was MIAMI UNIVERSITY STUDENT TELEVISION (MUST).

Programs included an hour-long rock concert each week, a biweekly half-hour program featuring talented junior high school students from the public school system in Oxford, a biweekly issues program on professors' views on topics related to the Oxford community such as the dangers posed by a nearby toxic waste dump, and a weekly half-hour call-in program in which city officials answered questions about problems such as a chronic water shortage. The call-in program was live one night and run on tape the next.

The Mass Communication area and students benefitted from our experiment in several obvious ways. Students gained experience in planning, budgeting of time and facilities, and in meeting deadlines. The University Public Relations office selected MUST as one of four innovative programs for Miami trustees to visit. And, the president of the university invited MUST to produce Miami sports for cable. The student manager, supervising faculty member and chief engineer responded with a plan and a budget to produce five home football games in the fall term of 1983 to be played on

tape-delay on Dayton, Cincinnati and Columbus, Ohio cable systems, which the President approved.

Because the university entrusted MUST with so much responsibility, the organization must operate efficiently to maximize production and student learning in a systematic way. Therefore, we decided to examine the principles of experiential learning as a guide for on-the-job training for our students to learn to produce quickly and efficiently and to gain maximum benefits from the program. Ideally, experiential learning programs should have: (1) clearly defined learning objectives; (2) prefield orientation; (3) individualized learning contracts and reading lists; (4) a method of evaluation for student performance; and (5) continuous supervision and monitoring by a faculty supervisor and on-site supervisor.[7] Following is a self-analysis of our performance measured against these objectives.

Learning Objectives

Initially, neither the faculty supervisor of the management seminar, nor the students had any background in cable television management. As a result, the seminar was loosely structured around tasks to be accomplished by the end of the term. At first the course was run as a committee of twelve moderated by the instructor, who provided information on cable history, regulation and basic technology. The instructor assumed that students would learn a variety of unpredictables, which probably could not clearly be specified at the start of the course. As

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[7]Edward L. Angus, "Evaluating Experiential Learning," in Implementing Field Experience Education, ed. John Duley (San Francisco: Josey Bass Inc., 1974), pp. 78-82.

the class tried to formulate policy, two students took the lead and developed a management structure, while others designed pilot programs to fit MUST's policy objectives. The purpose of having seminar members actually produce pilots was was two-fold: first, to see whether these programs fit the policy objectives (to give practical experience to students, to serve the student and community audiences, and to reflect positively on the university); and second, to provide a measure of production potential within specified limits of time, equipment, personnel and money. Ten pilot programs, averaging 28 minutes each, were produced and approved for telecast. Judged against ideal experiential learning procedures, the seminar failed to provide adequate learning objectives; judged against the tasks to be accomplished, and against anonymous student evaluations, it succeeded exceptionally well. Seminar members generally rated the seminar experience as "superior."

Based on what we learned in the fall, winter term learning objectives were clearly spelled out. For example, one unit of the seminar required each member of the management team to develop goals to be accomplished by specific dates during the term. One learning objective for this unit was: "At the end of this unit you should be able to budget your time according to priorities of the organization." To determine priorities for MUST was the focus of weekly seminar meetings. Another learning objective, which each management member fit to his/her job, e.g., general manager, was to compile a reading list of helpful material.

The task objectives of the general manager of the channel seemed clear, but applying the learning objectives to this role proved extremely difficult, mainly because of the complexity of skills and knowledge required to manage others. Add to that complexity the novelty of the

tasks to be accomplished by the team, and this analogy comes to mind: "a man builds a boat while he rides in it." Obviously, the greater the responsibility for leadership and supervision, the more complex the skills one must learn. Ideally, each person should be offered management courses in the area of his/her responsibility, but that might be impossible to provide even within the largest of departments. Our seminar, instead, chose the person to do the job who seemed most qualified and eager to perform certain tasks.

Prefield Orientation

The first term of our experiment functioned as a kind of prefield orientation. However, because so many students were needed to produce programs on a regular basis, independent study students who produced and worked on programs were not adequately instructed as to specific tasks. For example, several program producers failed to set deadlines for field crews, while others did not schedule editing time far enough in advance. By the third week of the term, to hold independent study students accountable for timely production and crew work, weekly evaluation reports became a requirement and weekly grades were given by the instructor, based on organization, promptness, reliability and cooperativeness. Producers evaluated crew work, and both producers and crew submitted weekly self-evaluations in which they described their week's efforts. These reports also were used to identify problems. The reporting system should have been explained as part of prefield orientation. This procedure would have focussed on the importance of evaluation criteria related both to task and to learning objectives.

Evaluation

Scholars in experiential learning have developed several suggestions concerning evaluation which may prove helpful. Evaluation procedures may include:

1. intermediate feedback.
2. a journal that is reviewed and discussed periodically by the intern and faculty advisor.
3. seminars and workshops during the experience.
4. critical incident writing--describing "specific situations and actions taken that demonstrate the utilization" of skills acquired.
5. final interviews and written evaluations.
6. written and/or oral final reports.
7. self-evaluation.
8. program evaluation by student.[8]
9. product evaluation by faculty and students.[9]

This final type of evaluation requires review of work done, such as videotapes and photos. For a fair grade to be determined the evaluator(s) must always realize that the work was performed by a student in a learning experience and not by seasoned professionals.

Beginning in the winter term we began student assessments in the form of reports from producers and managers and student self-evaluations. We required these evaluations weekly. Although this practice provided students with some supervisory and evaluation experience, we needed more information to form an adequate idea of the student's efforts and improvement.

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[8]Angus, pp. 78-83.

[9]John Duley, College-Sponsored Experiential Learning (Columbia, MD: Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning, 1977), p. 5.

We believe it is important to employ additional methods of assessment, such as product evaluation and critical incident writing.

Faculty Supervisor

The faculty supervisor probably plays the most important role in any experiential process.[10] In our experiment this was especially true, for he was responsible for: (2) designing the courses and program structure; (2) obtaining university approval of courses; (3) acting as a trouble shooter; and (4) evaluating student performance, progress, and improvement. The faculty supervisor also assigned weekly grades to all independent study students, reported each month to a university cable advisory committee, supervised production of a weekly television magazine program, met weekly with the management practicum, and produced several of his own programs for use on cable.[11]

These duties became overly burdensome for a faculty member with other teaching, supervisory, and research obligations. We believe that we would have been more successful if the faculty member could have dedicated practically all of his efforts to the practicum and to supervising program production.

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[10] Tyrone R. Baines, "The Faculty Supervisor," in Implementing Field Experience Education, ed. John Duley (San Francisco: Josey Bass Inc., 1974), pp. 41-44.

[11] Hadley Nesbitt has suggested three other functions that the faculty supervisor should perform: (1) assign relevant materials for reading; (2) determine value of proposed program; and (3) prepare students for the practical assignment in any possible manner. Hadley Nesbitt, A Student Guide to Learning Through College-Sponsored Work Experience (Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 1975), p. 25.

On-Site Supervisor

Although the faculty supervisor's role is pivital for this type of program, ideally the on-site supervisor should have many responsibilities. William R. Ramsey, Dean of Labor at Berea College, has developed a list of the most important tasks performed by the on-site supervisor in experiential learning experiences:

1. relating the working environment to theories and ideas learned in the classroom.

2. integrating the educational needs of the student with the needs of the sponsoring agency.

3. planning effectively.

4. recruiting, interviewing and selecting.

5. providing a support structure for the student.

6. orienting the intern on the working environment and available resources.[12]

In our case the role of the on-site supervisor was never properly performed. Even though the faculty supervisor and the Mass Communication Chief Engineer closely monitored the practicum's progress, some students were charged with the responsibility of supervising their fellow students. Problems arose because these students (managers and producers) lacked management experience and needed continual instruction. Although they may have benefitted from this practical management experience, students under them suffered during the process.

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[12] William R. Ramsey, "Role of the Agency Supervisor," in Implementing Field Experience Education, ed. John Duley (San Francisco: Josey Bass Inc., 1974), pp. 45-54.

Recommendations

Based on our experience and available literature on experiential learning, we will proceed differently in the 1983-84 school year. Our suggestions may not be "ideal" solutions to the problems in these types of programs, but they represent what we believe can be done, given limitations of time, personnel and equipment:

1. involve as many Mass Communication faculty members as possible with the program to divide the work load and to reduce student production crews operating on independent studies.

2. lobby for a full-time Instructor/Program Coordinator to be hired, preferably on a non-tenure track basis, so all of his efforts can be geared toward the practicum, to supervise students and coordinate the program.

3. have a graduate student executive producer in the seminar coordinate program production developed for cable in regular production classes.

4. describe the specific tasks to be accomplished and learning objectives they relate to before the term begins.

5. plan and execute orientation meetings at the beginning of the term, based on problems encountered last year.

6. restrict cable management seminar instructor to management supervision and assign production supervision to other faculty involved in production classes.

7. develop a master calendar of tasks to be accomplished during the term.

8. enlist the help of a cable or broadcast television manager to serve as a professional advisor to the faculty and students throughout the term.

Summary

We believe that our cable program is off to a good start. As a result, students have become better trained for video production and management careers, and the local community has benefitted from the programming. However, we faced many difficulties, for we were breaking new ground in the area of experiential learning. We hope that this analysis of our efforts will help us to improve and serve to guide others who already have or plan to develop similar programs.